The Street of Bygone Yuletides

By F. F. Van de Water

THIS is in memory of the Street of Bygone Yuletides.

Where the gray prow of the Flatiron divides the tide of traffic that washes the flank of Madison Square, West Twenty-third Street touches the hurry and color of the throng bent on Christmas shopping and then stretches away toward Sixth Avenue, desolate and forgotten.

Northward that tide runs through the canyon of Fifth Avenue, stratified with the holiday riches of all the world, clamorous with the movement and speech and laughter of a million shoppers, brilliant with store lights gleaming upon holly and mistletoe and Christmas trees, upon jewelry and shimmering fabrics and toys and all the gifts for which the city seeks.

Apathetically, Twenty-third Street watches that splendid flow that used to sweep across its pavements, a down-at-the-heels, poor-relation-who-has-seen-better-days thoroughfare.

Memory of Christmas Past

On the eve of the Day of Days the sound of trumpets softly blown comes through the frosty air from the heart of the square. A fir tree slowly kindles into light, picked out against the dark bulk of buildings in red and blue and orange and green electric bulbs. The crowd that has gathered about its base chants the triumphant "Adeste Fideles."

The echoes run through the Street of the Christmases of Yesteryear and rouse the ghosts that must linger along its barren reaches. That is as close as the thoroughfare that was once the chief shrine of the city's Yuletide preparations ever gets to the Christmas of to-day. It lies, a dark backwater, left stagnant and untraveled by the shift in New York's human tides that took away its pomp and pride half a generation ago.

Tenacious Fourteenth Street

Fifth Avenue from Thirtieth to Fiftieth Street is the altar on which Manhattan to-day kindles its holiday fires. Before that for many years Twenty-third Street from Broadway and Fifth Avenue to Sixth was the focal point of all Christmas shopping. Earlier still Fourteenth Street held supremacy.

To this day Fourteenth Street refuses to concede that she is passée. Decked out in the tinsel and filigree of cheap shops and boasting one of the city's great department stores that has remained faithful, she still proclaims her defiance of age and shifting population centers. Rather wrinkled and out of fashion is Fourteenth Street, but she is an old lady who refuses to be downhearted. Brave in moving picture palace and café, in 5 and 10-cent stores and auction rooms, she laughs at the world.

It is not so with her successor. Fourteenth Street is boisterously alive. Twenty-third Street is dreary and bleak and very nearly dead. From the East River to the square she still boasts of her crowds and her glittering show windows, but there the Flatiron seems to have placed his mighty foot upon her and broken her back.

The Deserters

Beyond Fifth Avenue there are loft buildings and wholesale houses and a few mushroom shops. That is all. Gone are the rush and jargon of holiday shoppers; the clatter of smartly equipped private carriages; the rumble and shrilling bells of the first electric cabs; the roar of cable cars.

Gone also are the great shops that drew their customers at Christmas time from half a dozen states.

Stern's deserted her for Forty-second Street. McCreery's and McCutcheon's left her for Thirty-third. Best, Lebolt and others fled away from her to the Avenue. Le Boutillier died with the passing of the street's glory.

Along Sixty-Avenue from Twenty-third to Eighteenth Street there ran a solid rampart of great stores fifteen years ago. Only one still lives, and this now stands at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-third. The others—Ehrich's, O'Neill's, Adams's, Simpson, Crawford & Simpson's—all have gone, and the wholesaler and the loft operator are the lions and the lizards who keep their courts.

So Very Long Ago

Not so many years ago in time, but a mighty age when measured by changes: when our war with Spain was still a dire and bloody conflict in men's minds, when the automobile was greeted with the chorus, "Git a horse!"; when women boasted wasp waistlines and high piled pompadours, when men were independently wealthy on a hundred thousand—say, twenty years ago—Twenty-third Street was to those of us who remember her in her Yuletide glory at least a byroad to paradise.

Christmas time and Christmas shopping on that street of a thousand wonders, buffeted by the crowds and hauled from glory unto glory by a long-suffering parent—life could hold nothing more.

Memories of the Past

There were shiny carriages packed along the curb, on the front seat of which a uniformed deity sat behind sleek horses, while another stood at attention beside the door. There were thrilling red cable cars that slid up and down Broadway in obedience, when everything worked properly, to the wheel that the motorman turned. There were stalwart policemen, fatter than those of to-day and at least a foot higher by reason of their helmets, who directed the streams of traffic that have of late years grown into such unwieldy surges.

Along the pavement, calmly obstructing the passage of the shoppers, were venders of mechanical toys—models of those newfangled automobiles that ran 'round in circles, tin men who walked underfoot when they were wound up and a dozen other marvelous things that made you desirous of making radical alterations in your letter to Santa Claus.

There were toy windows affording views of wonders quite as awe-inspiring as can be any vistas concealed by the pearly gates. With your nose tight against the plate-glass of Schwartz's or Charles's you gazed in rapture at sleds, and engines, and soldiers' uniforms and rank upon rank of lead soldiers, all made in Germany, and all goose-stepping in a fashion that then roused no abhorrence. The communication to Santa Claus received further emendation then and there.

And in the windows of Best's the saint himself sat surrounded by all the elect of toydom, addressing in pantomime you and your fellow worshippers outside, who jumped up and down on one another's feet and were beside yourself in ecstasy and wept bitterly when you were led away.

WHERE the gray prow of the Flatiron Building divides the traffic that washes the flank of Madison Square

And Then the Musee

And then—climax of all wonders—there was the Eden Musée, into which, if there was enough time before the train went, you were ushered by a parent on the verge of exhaustion. The wax policeman at the gate; the sleeping attendant, who snored just as if he were alive; the "Rulers of the World," just like real, for a small boy to gaze upon; "Ajeeb," the chess player; the thrills and delicious terrors of the "Chamber of Horrors," and the "Cinematograph," that newfangled contrivance that projected shaky pictures of bullfights and "The Empire State Express" on a sheet at one end of the hall.

The Mutations of Time

There was material for a whole year of dreaming in Twenty-third Street a score of years ago. Packed from curb to curb with the cream of the city's shoppers, its windows gorgeous with gifts, vastly expensive at a third of their present prices; its air filled with the clamor of the holiday crowds and tingling with Christmas spirit—there was no place in all the world that could compare with it.

How the buildings have shrunk and the barren street has widened in the last generation! Drays and trucks clutter the curbs where once the horses of the wealthy ones stamped. Manufacturers of furniture, and coats, and bathing suits, and knit goods and underwear hold forth in the shabby buildings that were once the city's proudest stores.

The shrine that held all the manifold glories of "The Liliputian Bazaar" looks blankly out over Sixth Avenue. That sacred window from which Santa Claus surveyed his horde of small worshippers is gone, and where it stood a chain cigar store, a lunch stand, a small printing shop, a haircutter and a cobbler feed on the traffic that still runs past that place of vanished wonders.

Wider in Its Emptiness

The half empty street seems twice its former breadth. Here and there in the old familiar row of buildings there is an empty space, blank and ugly as a missing tooth.

At dusk only a few lights shine in the windows that once blazed so proudly. Through these Twenty-third Street looks out suspiciously on the Christmas world, as if wondering drearily what is going to happen next.

Yet, surely, there must be ghosts that come in the gloaming to her aid—the little boys and girls she thrilled and mystified in the Christmases of what is rapidly becoming the long ago, the parents who, in the quieter years of the young century, led them through the wonders that once were hers.

They must come back to wish a Merry Christmas to the Street of Bygone Yuletides.

Drawing by T. J. Machamer

A Problem for Santa Claus

By Thomas L. Masson

EVERY CHRISTMAS has its memories. I remember when I was a little boy I had a post-Christmas diplomatic encounter with another boy.

He had been presented with a copy of Robinson Crusoe and I sported a copy of Ivanhoe. I say "sported" advisedly. Having retired back of the ice-incrusted woodshed for due meditation, I conceived a plan of attack which, over the long lapse of ages, I still regard with becoming pride. I sported Ivanhoe before that boy and laid on its glamour with a trowel.

"Kings and queens," I said "mounted on Arabian steeds caper through these pages and stab each other to death ever and anon. Beautiful maidens are rescued by the hair of their heads from mossy castles all stuck over with costly jewels. I wouldn't let you look in this book of mine for all the diamonds in the world. There's hideous death in every chapter and rivers of blood flow to the sea.

And This in Scotland

"The scene of these horrid doings is laid in Scotland, a land where naked and hairy men drink buckets of warm gore and cut off each other's heads just for that. Every castle in the whole horrid place has a deep dungeon, where mighty knights from other lands snatch fair-haired girls from death. As for dragons, you can't count 'em. They go about snorting fire, and a great, tall, lovely queen named Elizabeth, who has flashing eyes, sits on their backs for pleasure and has a lot of young kings who wait on her when they ain't killin' an' rescuing somebody. You couldn't look at this book. I'm going to spend the next month reading it over and over. And over and over!"

That was the way I got Robinson Crusoe and he got Ivanhoe.

There is no pleasure like getting something you want from somebody in exchange for something they don't know how much they might want if they knew about it.

In those days we went out in the New England woods and cut down our own Christmas trees, dragging them on sleds to our homes. We popped corn and put it on strings and had candles and everything. Now the children listen to the crackle of radiators and nonchalantly wonder whether the shops will yield up anything worth while.

I got a large potato once in the toe of my stocking. What a prize that would be to-day!

New York has grown to a big city, and Santa Claus is at his wits' end to know what to do about it.

Santa Needs Backers

The real trouble with Santa Claus, so far as New York is concerned, is that he isn't underwritten enough. He needs backers. All the comfortably off fathers and mothers are backing him, it is true, if it's only for a place in the home, but the fathers and mothers of the slums are still having a hard time of it. They have to depend a good deal upon outsiders, and outsiders are notoriously indifferent.

The biggest outsider our slums has is Uncle Sam. He might back up Santa Claus a little more than he does, if you should ask me.

If Uncle Sam backed up Santa Claus every Christmas he might get into the habit of backing up the slums all the year around.

Would that help any? Ask the one who knows.

It's a great thing to have children—when they are not in the slums. It's a great thing to have an Uncle Sam—when he isn't too busy with politics.

Just a Dream

I had a dream. The war was over and Uncle Sam, Santa Claus and the Slums sat down for a conference.

"My good friend Santa Claus," says the Slums, offhand-like but still looking sad, "has kept me alive every Christmas now for many years. It's true that he hasn't brought me so much as others, but after all it's the visit that counts, and I have never known him not to come around, even if he has passed by on the other side of the street and just given me a cheerio."

"What are you driving at?" says Uncle Sam, uneasily, flecking the ashes from his flivver. "Ain't I doin' things for you?" he goes on, in his lordly way.

"Look at these charitable institutions of mine," says Uncle Sam. "Why, when you're starvin' and highly recommended, don't they do something for yer?"

"They ain't bad folks," said Santa Claus, shifting his pack and tapping his stomach thoughtfully. "Maybe they don't know everything, but then—we're all mortal beings—except myself," he chuckled.

"You can't fool me," said the Slums, disrespectfully. "I've been reading."

A Discovery

"Whatcher been reading, eh?" said Uncle Sam, changing his gum; "some of them highfalutin' social books, I betcher! All about capitalists and things yer don't know about and I don't know about and nobody knows about."

"No such thing," said the Slums. "I been readin' in a book called the Bible, and it says, 'Suffer little children to come unter me 'nd forbid 'em not, eh," says the Slums, looking at Santa Claus. "'Nd at first I just thought it was you, but now I know it's you," blurts out the Slums, fixing that nice old gentleman with a bleary eye. "It's you," says the Slums to Uncle Sam. "If you ask me, I'll say I need your help, and you got ter do something about it."

"What do you think I oughter do?" says Uncle Sam, and he was blushing to the roots of his hair—think of a nice, respectable, well fed gentleman blushing, just like that.

"Well," says the Slums, "this book the Bible it goes on to say the poor you'll always have with you. Say, Bo, what do you know about that? I'll bet yer never knew a thing about it. You trail this 'ere chap Santa Claus around just one Christmas and you'll learn a lot that ain't in books, believe me, 'nd ain't in charitable layouts. 'Nd, besides, when you make people take something they don't know about, if it's really good for 'em, then you may get something you don't know about."

Dreams Are Queer Things

"There's something to that, friend," says Santa Claus, "'nd I've often thought if you'd take a little personal interest"——

"I'll do it!" says Uncle Sam, posi-tively, just like that. Then he looks the Slums all over and says: "Look a here. You don't know me. I'm the man that drafted the boys almost overnight. I'm the man that took the corn out of Barleycorn. I'm the man that milked the cow with the crumpled horn 'nd gave the vote to the maiden all forlorn. What you want, friend, is a good housecleanin'. I'll make you all over, by jiminy crickets, until you won't know yourself, 'nd"——

And then I woke up.

Such nonsense!

A Wedding Morn in the Tropics

A TROPICAL wedding, with all its color and greenness, is described by a Jamaica correspondent of The Manchester Guardian. He writes:

A playful breeze fluttered the curtains and bore in through the window the fragrance of coffee blossoms and the myriad sweetnesses of a tropic morning. The sun slanted a golden beam across my pillow and I remembered that it was the wedding morning of Estelle. Estelle, servant "gal" at the Great House, was this day to be led to the altar by Zebediah Brown, of the village of Content.

About 10 o'clock we walked down to the Dallas road and sat on the bank waiting for the bridal procession to pass along on its way to the church, some five miles down the valley. The sun was strong now, and we nestled deep into the bracken under the shade of cedars overgrown with old man's beard. A hush hung over the world, and even the wild beauty of these mountains seemed subdued in the calm of this Sabbath day. The silence was soon broken by the quick beating of hoofs in the far distance. It was old Notiss, the carpenter, resplendent as we had never seen him before. Then there was a glimmer of white, and we got our cameras ready. No society bride ever ran the gantlet of photographers more gracefully than Estelle did, though I doubt not that had her skin been white instead of a chocolate brown she would have blushed. Along with her rode her mother and father. After them came a medley of colored men and women. Strangely enough, with the exception of Estelle's mother and Estelle herself, who were mounted on steeds lent for the occasion, what riders there were were men. The women followed on foot, their heads tied with bright bandanna handkerchiefs. Most of the men and youths, although they wore as far as the eye could see most of the garments that convention and climate demanded, were barefooted. They were not used to walking in boots, and they had a longish way to go. But they most of them had boots. These were carried in the hand, and would in due course be put on at the church door after a great deal of polishing and pain.

The bridegroom went by another way, and it was not until late that afternoon that we saw him at the marriage feast, which was held at the village of Content, a long, straggling little collection of wattle huts set in scenery that seemed to pluck at one's heart. The sounds of revelry guided us to the bower of bamboo and banana leaves which had been erected for the occasion. Within this, round a table covered with a dazzling white cloth, sat about thirty colored folk of all ages and sizes from the twins upward. Many more were standing round, waiting for their chance for a seat. At the head, intrenched behind a massive cake, sat Zebediah and his bride. Poor Zebediah we could see at a glance was unmanned. He sat staring sheepishly at the great slice of cake on the tablecloth before him. Even Estelle, her hands folded in her lap, had lost that fine composure which so well became her when she rode by in the morning. They smiled at us in watery fashion, and places were made for us round the groaning board, which was covered with fruit and cake and loaves of bread shaped like birds and fishes and all manner of flesh and fowl. Great wineglasses filled with syrup were before the guests, though I am afraid that Zebediah's father had found other and stronger means of refreshing himself. He seemed very anxious to kiss the girls and to sing and pull the string of a large "jumping jack" which hung from a bamboo pole. This tickled the twins considerably.

Later speeches were made, and then the whole party adjourned to the Great House, where the big dining room, lent for the occasion, had been cleared for dancing. The concertina came to the fore again, and a flute, and the dancing began. Round they went, these black, perspiring folk, to the weird music produced by the union, though one can hardly call it that, of these two instruments. They waltzed, then they did the lancers and some other dances of their own composition. And the merry-making and dancing went on until long after midnight, when one by one the revelers went to their huts scattered about the moonlit hills. Many miles lay between some of them and home, and I have no doubt that there was many a sinking heart as they went away. For who does not know that ghosts and other strange creatures lurk in the shadow of the whispering trees?